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Early Years of Serikat Buruh Kereta Api (Railway Workers Union, SBKA): Formation and Orientation*

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Abstract

This essay describes the formation of Serikat Buruh Kereta Api (Railway Workers Union, SBKA) and its early orientation during the Indonesian revolution period of 1945-50. SBKA originated from workers committees formed by groups of labour with nationalistic enthusiasm in order to secure the take-over process for independence. Later this committee was transformed into a union in response to government policies. Based on this description, this essay shows how the formation of unions at that period was primarily shaped by nationalism and was in dialectic interaction with the new Indonesian state, but had few direct references to its historical legacy from unionism of the colonial period.

Keywords: Indonesian history, Indonesian revolution, Indonesian labour union, labour history, Serikat Buruh Kereta Api, railway workers union, union formation

Introduction

In the aftermath of the 1923 strike of Vereeniging voor Spoor- en Tramwegpersoneel in Nederlandsch-Indie (Union of Rail and Tramway Workers in the Netherlands Indies, VSTP),¹⁾ the Dutch colonial administration banned any organizational activities among railway workers, as the expansion of unionism amongst them was perceived as a threat to the colonial order. Their leaders were jailed and exiled to the Digul concentration camp in Papua while their members were simply

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1) Established in 1908, VSTP was one of the oldest unions formed during colonial period and its 1923 strike led by Semaun, was recorded as the largest union strike during the time. For detailed account of the strike, see Ingleson [1981].

sacked or, in some cases, refused to be reemployed, and then could not find alternative jobs in any other private railway companies. A government-controlled union was quickly established as a replacement of VSTP. Further restrictions and tight monitoring were applied among the workers who used to be VSTP members and were still working inside the railway company. Later, consideration was given to the establishment of a special council for the settlement of any labour conflict within the railway management [McVey 1965: 414, n. 119].²⁾ Under these circumstances, the seeds planted by Semaun³⁾ for unionism among the railway workers could hardly grow. During the subsequent historical events, those seeds would be destined to die because under the Japanese occupation (1942-45) any kind of workers' organization was prohibited [see Sato 2000].

Given this historical legacy of union repression, how could then railway workers organize and unionize themselves during the revolutionary period (1945-50)? Since union formation has never taken place in a historical vacuum, the process of how workers could manage and persuade their fellow brothers to form a union is an important issue to be addressed. Unions everywhere have the initial drive to recruit members based on their universal ideology to provide services and pursue a certain political agenda. Their actions normally draw upon the history of union activism over a certain period of time as union activists would give directions and take decisions based on the lessons they have learned from experience. Placed in the Indonesian revolutionary situation when there was no capacity and no generational linkage with regard to the accumulation of experience in unionism from their predecessors, what made the (railway) workers establish and promote the development of labour unions? Focusing on Serikat Buruh Kereta Api (Railway Workers Union, SBKA), this essay describes the roots and origins of union formation in Indonesia during the revolutionary period (1945-50). It is found that the formation of SBKA had its basis in the nationalist force of general working class attitude at that time and also in response to the government's position towards syndicalism. SBKA serves as an example of the nature of workers' organizations and how they reacted in consequence of government perceptions on organized labour. From this account of SBKA, this essay further suggests that union formation during the 1945-50 period was characterized by a spirit of labour nationalism and in its dealings with the new Indonesian state and, due to the Japanese occupation, there was a significant break in the historical continuity of union activism from the colonial times.

2) McVey [1965] notes that "the government had formed a commission to determine whether it should institute government-labor-management councils to settle dispute in public services and vital enterprises." I am indebted to Prof. Mizuno Kosuke for his careful observation on this detail.

3) In 1915 Semaun was admitted as one of the first Indonesians to become members of VSTP's Central Executive, after his intense contact with Hendrik Sneevliet, a prominent Dutch communist. A year later, he quit his job to become a full-time trade unionist. By 1918, he was the Chairman of VSTP. Ingleson [1981: 61] notes that "(h)e was well read in history of the European labor movement and aware of the considerable differences between the social and political consciousness of Indonesian workers and that of their European counterparts."

Semaun was also active in the central leadership of Sarekat Islam. Shiraishi [1990] describes in details his activities and involvement within this organization.

Labour Unions and the New Indonesian State

The period of 1945–50 was a crucial period during which the Indonesian state was trying hard to consolidate its resources and also establish power over society. The proclamation of independence on August 17, 1945 was a day with little preparation in bringing forth a new state. However, soon after this proclamation, as Kahin [1952: 138] notes, “(t)he establishment of a government for the newly proclaimed Republic proceeded rapidly” and within a week the first constitution was drafted. Although the new government had to face the Dutch who were eager to return with their troops under the sponsorship of Netherlands Indies Civil Administration (NICA), it continued its efforts to establish the necessary institutions and extend state functions to various fields. The Republic was eager to operate as a normal state would do. It had a set of basic principles which encompassed the necessary socio-political requirements, an orderly framework organization of offices and decrees from the central government in Jakarta which later moved to Yogyakarta to administer its functions and also, develop its military units. These components of the state’s institutions were well designed, at least on paper.

The Republican cabinets were changing and replacing one after the other every few months, however. In reality, the scope of the government’s aims was limited and restricted due to budget constraints, as even members of cabinet did not receive their monthly wages regularly. In these early days of independence, many of the state institutions were basically just starting to gear up and



Fig. 1 Indonesian State and the Labour Unions

Source: [SOBSI 1955: 13–15]

Note: Workers are pictured fighting side by side with the army for independence against the encroaching Dutch troops. Signs of factories being taken over are in the background and efforts to assemble Congress are in the foreground.

trying their best to penetrate society by imposing rules and regulations. As this essay will describe, this was also the case of the Railway Bureau with the workers committee. Therefore, the revolutionary period could be regarded as an early phase in Indonesian state formation. In the midst of revolutionary zeal, the Indonesian state was taking shape through trial and error.

At the same time as the state was busy organizing itself, union activists at the national level arranged a general meeting. On September 15, 1945 in Jakarta, Barisan Buruh Indonesia (Indonesian Labour Front, BBI) was formed.⁴⁾ Consisting of several existing local unions, it was meant to unite and coordinate all workers from various industries. The meeting and BBI itself enjoyed active support from Iwa Kusumasumantri, the Minister of Social Affairs. There was a high possibility he might give further unofficial backing by promoting BBI's resolutions in the government [Anderson 1972: 313]. Despite his long personal interest in the labour movement, Kusumasumantri's involvement in the arrangement of this labour movement clearly indicates the state's active role in the promotion of unionism. For the new state to grow strong, it was necessary to develop a labour constituency. The main reason for this, as Kassalow [1963: 258] concludes in his study on the labour movement in the postwar countries, was that "(a)lthough this working class is relatively small, the very nature of what is going on in these countries tends to make it important politically." It shows the importance of urban working class in the formation of the new state. The Indonesian labour movement clearly played a part in the national revolution, which became a formative part of its own history.

Nationalist Drive towards Union Formation

Soon after the proclamation of independence on August 17, 1945, like their brothers in other industries,⁵⁾ the railway workers began planning to take over the railway bureau from the Japanese army. They were young in spirit, daring, and with nationalist determination to turn their courage into real actions. For that, as described in one book [Panitia Penjusun Buku 1970: 29]:

in Jakarta, the spirit to take over power from the Japanese occupation army was so overwhelming, that on the night of September 3, a meeting was held in Bro. Bandero's house just to discuss the steps in taking over power from Japanese army. The next morning, without even waiting for any news from last night's meeting, the take-over was carried out in the Jakarta office of West Exploration area. Since September 4, 1945, the management of Railway Bureau in Jakarta has been taken over from the Japanese army.

4) For details of this historical event, see Sandra [1961], Tedjasukmana [1958] and Trimurti [1980].

5) Unlike their counterparts in Java's plantation areas who were active in taking over plantations' estates, plantation workers in North Sumatra, however, as noted by Ann Laura Stoler [1983: 163] did not undertake such actions as "they were unlikely candidates for revolutionary militancy" because of the "little room for labor activism on the estates and little opportunity for contact with the nationalist underground outside their borders."

Meanwhile on the same day, as Sutter [1959: 293] notes:

at the Manggarai railway center in Djakarta, railway workers passed a resolution in the name of all railway employees in Indonesia, which declared the railway systems in Indonesia to be Milik Negara Republik Indonesia (state property) as of that day. Indonesian personnel were urged to consider themselves state employees, and a committee headed by Soegandi was set up to facilitate their take-over of the railways.

This news from Jakarta then spread up to other areas. By the end of September, by the hand of these young Indonesian workers, all railway stations throughout Java were then declared to be “Milik Negara Republik Indonesia” (state property of the Republic of Indonesia). In a short time, by October 5, as the take-over process took place rather smoothly, it was formally announced that stations were no longer under the Japanese army, and no single Japanese was even allowed to enter any station, railway office and workshop [Parwitokoesoemo 1946].

Because of their vital function as a public space, stations became even more important for security reasons. As far as safety was concerned, the railway workers had a crucial task during the revolution: to guard and keep stations under the Republican control. In each station, they formed a group to make sure that this task could be executed accordingly. Later on, when the unstable situation made this necessary, the management and administration of railway stations were also organized under the authority of these groups.

As of early September 1945 many such groups existed in stations throughout Java, but it was not until March 12, 1946 that these groups came together to form an alliance as a labour union. On that day, as one eyewitness recalled [Anonymous 1946: 23. *Italics added*]:

dlm kongres boeroeh kereta api jg pertama, lahirlah *Serikat Boeroeh* Kereta Api Djawa Madoera diatas peleboeran beberapa *perserikatan pegawai* K.A. seloeroeh Djawa Madoera.
[in its first congress, Railway Workers *Union* of Java and Madura was established as an amalgamation of several *workers' unity* of railway workers throughout Java and Madura.]

This remark suggests that during the three-day meeting in Solo, there was a radical change in understanding of the concept of unionism. Various groups known as “*perserikatan pegawai*” (workers’ unity) maintained the same conception of what their groups really were and merged into a single “*Serikat Boeroeh*” (labour union). It can be concluded that the so-called “formation” of the early railway union during the Indonesian revolutionary period, unlike their counterpart of the English labour unions who came from gathering of field labourers and artisans [Thompson 1963], marked a “transformation” of understanding as “nationalist groups” came to form a union as their collective vehicle.

This transformation in understanding of the format of a labour union indicated that the groups had switched their nationalist mission and intended to focus on the welfare of railway workers as a working class. The idea of forming a union was based on the well being of workers and defending their welfare was something to be valued and worth fighting for. It was the main impetus of this transformation. It is because the objectives of having better working conditions, realizing

improvements compared to the situation during the Japanese occupation, and making sure that “(railway) workers can still perform their duty as expected. . . (the) S.B.K.A. cares also about the welfare of workers during this revolutionary period for independence” [Anonymous 1946: 23] were set as a goal during that meeting.

Lingering memories of the poor working conditions during the Japanese occupation prompted the need for improvements. Workers found the drive to improve their livelihood by extending the organizational capacity of their group. Since at that particular time the management and operation of railways were practically under the control of their fellow workers, they were able to look after their own needs. It was this nationalist reason that made up the initial impetus for their union-organizational tendency. Because the railway station had become their centre of organizational activities ever since they took it over from the Japanese authorities, what they looked at in second instance was their work and the working conditions in the station. In this sense, similarly with their brothers in other industries, railway workers formed their unions on a territorial basis, making the station they worked at their point of reference. Labour movements in many former colonial countries were indeed nationalist in one way or another. Thompson [1947: 14] notes concerning the postwar development of labour unions in Southeast Asian countries that “(n)ationalism, in the embrace of socialism or communism, has been its guiding and dominating force.” However, the development of that nationalist spirit under the revolutionary state after the colonial government is a subject of its own as to how labour could form and build its own organization independent from the new government. Nørlund [2004: 108] notes that labour unions in Vietnam had been an important factor since the beginning of the revolution, however, after the revolution ended in 1945 and the Communist Party gained more power, “(t)he unions were one of the mass organizations that carried out party policy.” In French Africa, as Cooper [1997] describes, the formation of labour union actually was meant to challenge the colonial policy but once the country was abandoned by their colonizer, the African political leaders took the state offices and

Table 1 Central Board of the SBKA

	Before September 1946	After September 1946
Chairperson	Moenadi	Kardan
Vice chairperson	Kardan	Hardjosebroto
Secretary I	Hadisoemarto	Hadisoemarto
Secretary II	Moedjakir	Moedjakir
Treasurer I	Soebardjo	Soebardjo
Treasurer II	Pamoedji	Pamoedji
Members	Hardjosebroto, Abdullah, Asmodihardjo, Soekiman, Djadiman	Moenadi, Asmodihardjo, Abdullah, Soekiman, Djadiman, Moelkani, P. Adisoebroto
Liaison officers:		
Central office (Cisurupan)	Soedarmadi	Soedarmadi
West Java area (Purwokerto)	Soedargo	Soedargo
Central Java area (Purwodadi)	Singgih Poerwojadi	Singgih Poerwojadi
East Java area (Madiun)	Hadisoemartono	Hadisoemartono

Source: *Kereta Api*, no. 22 and no. 26, 1946

easily shifted the course of union struggle under the discourse of state development. The significance of Indonesian unions, in this case, the SBKA, is the capability to transform the nationalist drive of its revolutionary spirit into union formation on their own, and the fact that they could not be subdued easily by the state.

The Government's Response and The Workers' Reaction

The organizational transformation of SBKA was actually also shaped by, and in response to, the newly formed Indonesian state. When those groups of workers were taking over the stations, they acted with a nationalist purpose and then afterwards, with their own knowledge and skills, administered and managed the railway system without any support from the government. Malik [1950: 71] notes that upon the takeover of Jakarta station, the railway workers selected some heads for each department from amongst themselves, and after that, these individuals “swore their oath and promise in the upper open hall of the Jakarta station before the lower-level workers, youths and general public.” Later, within each exploration area office,⁶⁾ they formed a group known as “council of leaders” (*dewan pimpinan*), which supervised, managed and coordinated the railway system. In consequence, these groups had been successfully running the railway and serving the public for the first several months after independence, under the management and coordination of their own council of leaders. These young workers proved to be capable of operating and coordinating the railway system, a skill they had acquired during the period of Japanese occupation.

However as the state had gradually become more stable in politics and the so-called “central government” become more established, this kind of “self-management” of stations under the council of leaders was viewed with concern because of a fear that it could lead to syndicalism of the nation's economy. With the growing number of industrial factories and estate-plantations under the self-management of their own workers, the government perceived such spread of syndicalism would not be conducive for the general economic stability and investment climate, as some enterprises still, legally speaking, belonged to the Dutch. It was Vice President Hatta who named and criticized syndicalism in public at the Yogyakarta economic conference in February 1946 [Sutter 1959: 377]. That is the reason why since early 1946 the government had made plans to overcome the situation.

Under the central government's direction, several steps were taken to take over the management of stations from the control of the council of leaders. First, a formal governmental body, Djawatan Kereta Api (Railway Bureau) was established and centralized under the ministry of

6) Since the Dutch colonial period, in early 1900s, the railway system in Java—similarly to Java's administrative matters—has been divided into three “exploration areas”: West, Central, and East. Each was administered by one office in the respective area. They were coordinated and supervised under the by the *Balai Besar* (Central Office) located in Bandung, West Java.

7) Djuanda, like his friend Soekarno, was an architect who graduated from Bandung Technical School (I.T.B.) and later joined Soekarno's party. It should be noted that at the same time he held a post of Deputy Minister of Transportation, which was accordingly supposed to be supervising the Railways. Later on, since Oct 1946 (under the Third Sjahrir Cabinet) he continuously held a post of Minister of Transportation. He later became Prime Minister during 1957–59 [see Finch and Lev 1965].

Table 2 Board of Directors of the Railway Bureau

1.	Chief Director	: Ir. Djuanda
2.	Vice Chief Director	: Mr. Soewahjo Soemadilogo
3.	Head of Administration Department	: Pangestoe
4.	Head of Building and Railroad Department	: Ir. Soepardi
5.	Head of Traction Department	: Ir. Moh. Effendi Saleh
6.	Head of Traffic and Commercial Department	: L.J. Lopulisa
7.	Head of Exploration Area in West Java	: Soegandi
8.	Vice Head of Exploration Area in West Java	: Ir. Abdoelkadir
9.	Head of Exploration Area in Central Java	: Parwitokoesoemo
10.	Vice Head of Exploration Area in Central Java	: Ir. Hoesen
11.	Head of Exploration Area in East Java	: Soedji
12.	Vice Head of Exploration Area in East Java	: Ir. Aboeprajitno

Source: [*Boeroeh*, February 4, 1946]

transportation. Soon after that, by January 1946 a new chief director for this railway bureau was directly appointed by and came from the central government. He was Ir. Djuanda, a Soekarno's ring-circle nationalist who in fact had little knowledge about the railway system.⁷⁾ This appointment was formalized in *Makloemat Kementerian Perhoebongan* (Official Announcement of Minister of Transportation) no. 1/K.A. dated 23 January 1946. Twelve members, largely from the central government with only few of them having a railway background,⁸⁾ were also appointed to the board of directors in this *Makloemat* (see Table 2). A week later the central government announced another *Makloemat*: *Makloemat* no. 2/KA dated 31 January 1946. Through this document, a management board to oversee the railway system throughout Indonesia was appointed. From the beginning it was evident that the management board, which consisted of 27 divisions and sub-areas, was exclusively governed and directly appointed by the central government. Besides that, this *Makloemat* also ruled with regard to another important issue that was a follow up to the appointment of the new management board: the council of leaders, whose members consisted of railway workers, was not only stripped of its managing work but moreover, was dissolved permanently (*dilenjapkan*) and replaced by a new organization: the Serikat Sekerdja Kereta Api (Railway Workers Unity, SSKA) to function as representative of the railway workers.

These dramatic changes at their workplace came as a great shock to the workers. Although once self-managed and under the control of their own fellow brothers, much changed and from February 1946 they were regulated by and under direction of the central government. This factor shaped the mentality of the railway workers and brought a transformation of understanding of the nature of their organization, subsequently leading to the formation of one single labour union among

8) *Orang Indonesia jang terkemoeka di Djawa* [2604[1944]] notes that Pangestoe [p. 13], Soepardi [p. 217], Abdoelkadir [Abdoel Kader (?), p. 210], Parwitokoesoemo [p. 215], Hoesen [p. 212], and Aboeprajitno [p. 210] had worked in the Balai Besar Angkutan Darat (Central Office of Land Transportation) whilst Soegandi [p. 359] was a doctor. All of them were white collar (high-level) workers. Parwitokoesomo was the head of council of leaders at the central exploration area whilst Soedji was the head of council of leaders at the east exploration area [see Panitia Penjusun Buku 1970: 28].

themselves. The Serikat Boeroeh Kereta Api (Railway Workers Union, SBKA) was created on the second day of their congress, in March 13, 1946. The congress itself emphasized the situation faced by common railway workers since the takeover of stations and the introduction of management appointed by the central government. It is not known for certain whether the congress itself was held as a reaction against the *Makloemats*. However, in this respect, two resolutions were passed on the last day of congress and were addressed to the director of the railway bureau and the minister of transportation [*Merdeka*, 22 March 1946]:

Resolution no. 1: Urge the government that workers' representatives should be sit on in any government bodies whose duties are concerned with the welfare of workers or labour issues.

Resolution no. 2: Urge the government to:

1. revoke *Makloemat* no. 1/KA and no. 2/KA.
2. determine that the chief of the railway bureau should consider the workers' voice.
3. acknowledge the existence of council of leaders with its legislative role and whose members are elected based on the sovereignty of and by the railway workers (*berdasarkan Kedaulatan rakjat boeroeh KA*).

Those strongly worded resolutions came directly from the railway workers themselves since no "outside observers" (*penindjao*) were allowed to take part and participate in the congress [*Merdeka*, 8 March 1946]. They reflected the disappointment of railway workers at the central government's plan that would result in a total loss of their control over stations' management. It was an expression of their conviction "that workers' voice should be heard on issues regarding themselves" (*bahwa dalam penetapan nasibnja, kaoem boeroeh haroes didengar soearanja*) and that the council of leaders "had to be maintained" (*masih perloe diteroeskan*). However, they realized that their voice was not even heard in the appointment of board directors of the railway bureau and later found it was dominated by people from the central government. This, coupled with the dissolution of their own representative body, the council of leaders, was difficult to accept. Ultimately they lost their rights in managing the railway system because of the central government's plan.

However, in a situation different from their counterparts like Barisan Buruh Minjak (Oil refinery Workers' Union, BBM) [Sutter 1959], or to a lesser degree with Serikat Buruh Gula (Sugar Workers' Union, SBG) [Brown 1994], their disappointment did not bring them to join to Tan Malaka's followers, who during this time, were labeled as Trotskyist because of their activities in advocating syndicalism among fellow workers.⁹⁾ One reason for this might have come from the quick response of central government in handling their disappointment. A month after the publication of both the resolutions in the newspaper, the central government issued another *Makloemat*: *Makloemat* no. 3/KA dated April 30, 1946, which stated that "the appointment (of board of directors and management board) should be considered as temporary only until those persons appointed should show the necessary leadership and only after a more perfect appointment can be

9) Although it cannot be concluded the other way around that, SBKA fell under the ideological influence of (orthodox) Marxism. It is interesting to note that in one issue of *Kereta Api*, the official bulletin of SBKA, its front cover quoted Hatta's criticism of syndicalism which stressed that the struggle for genuine independence requires strong discipline from each civilian group, including the labour unions, and should be under orders of the state, instead of acting on their own [see S.D. 1946].

carried out.”¹⁰⁾

The *Makloemat* could have been a temporary decision signaling the workers to be a little patient under the circumstances. However, the real meaning (and its implications) of its statement was not explicitly clear as the substance was literally structured in long confusing sentences. Indeed, written under a pseudonym, one contemporary critic pointed out that although this latter *Makloemat* was issued to correct the previous two *Makloemats*, “its sentences contradict each other. . .since, of course, those persons appointed shall do their best to keep their job so and not let them be taken away by others” [Proletar Antara 1946c: 29–30].¹¹⁾ He also revealed that the *Makloemat* had conflated the notion of status and function of a job inside the railway bureau [*ibid.*]. It was not very clear, then, that the *Makloemat* was really meant for settling the problem of appointment. Nonetheless, the issue of that *Makloemat* clearly showed the central government’s persistence in implementing its plan to take control over stations, and to appease the sentiments of railway workers.

Compromise

Facing the central government’s definite plan in taking control over railway stations, railway workers were pushed to combine their nationalistic duty and managerial function at the same time. Later, put under pressure by the general public who viewed syndicalism as bringing the young nation into danger of separatism, the council of leaders had no choice but to cooperate with the central government’s arrangement in officially taking control over the railway stations.

On the other hand, their acceptance showed their preference to strengthen the independence struggle of the new state. On the other hand, it was also a symbol of their defeat as workers taking control of the means of production. These groups of workers, placed in a general social climate of support for the government with regard to the independence struggle, were forced to redefine their aim and, as the only feasible action left, transformed their organization into a labour union. The labour union was regarded as an instrument to channel their nationalist spirit and to perform their “responsibility” or “duty” to the nation (*kewadjiban*) since the railway was recognized as the most important means of transportation to defend the independence struggle [see Sarlan 1946 and *Merdeka*, 19 December 1945]. Besides, the labour union the workers envisaged was, of course, mainly focused on defending the interests at work.

In this regard, they made a concession to the central government. They demanded that their newly established union organization, the SBKA, would be recognized by the Minister of Transportation and also by the Minister of Social Affairs (who directed the Labour Department). This was one decision taken at the first congress. The recognition of the SBKA was an important

10) “bahwa pengangkatan 2 haroes dianggap sementara (tijdelijk waarnemend) hingga saatnja jang bersangkoetan menjatakan ketjakapannja oentoek pimpinan jang diserahkan kepadanja, dan penoenjoekkan jg lebih sempoerna dapat didjalankan.”

11) “Proletar Antara” can be translated as “Intermediary Proletariat.” Under this pseudonym, the author had written a series of four essays published simultaneously in the SBKA’s official bulletin, *Kereta Api*.

compromise they could offer in dealing with the dissolution of council of leaders. It was because the establishment of SSKA by the central government, as a kind of employee representation, was viewed as a threat to their own independence and collective purposes. As noted above, under the government's plan the SSKA was established to take over the functions of council of leaders. For that reason, the formation of SBKA was meant to challenge the establishment of SSKA.

It is important to note that the railway workers themselves named their organization SBKA in opposition to SSKA. Serikat Boeroeh was used to differentiate its origin from Serikat Sekerdja. Sjahrir in his booklet published in 1933 [Sjahrir [1933] 1947], used the term "Serikat Sekerdja" as a translation of "*vakbond*" from the Dutch word or "trade union" from English. The word "Sekerdja" can be translated as "in one and at the same occupation." This is in line with Sjahrir's idea on industry-based unionism, a "vertical" line of union. The term "Boeroeh" can be translated as "worker" or "labourer." It was used to indicate that their organization consisted of and was based on the workers themselves, not something formed by outsiders, i.e. the government. In contrast to SSKA which was based in Bandung where the central office of the railway bureau was located, drawing its membership mostly from the middle level railways workers who worked in that city, the SBKA was established in Solo and had a strong base in Jakarta and Yogyakarta among lower-level railway workers.¹²⁾ For the lower-level workers, the SBKA gave hope in the circumstances of economic hardship they had to face on a day to day basis during the revolutionary period.

The railway workers realized that they had become divided ever since they fell under the control of central government. Their unity no longer existed as the two organizations were run by different men with divergent objectives. There were several attempts to consolidate the two organizations, but no results were achieved.¹³⁾ This situation was later aggravated by the Dutch aggression when they occupied the city of Bandung and then caused the evolution of SSKA outside the general Indonesian labour movement.¹⁴⁾ On the other hand, the same development drove SBKA to follow their initial nationalistic character, which entailed supporting the Republican government.

12) During that time and at least until mid 1946, the Japanese occupation's three level system regarding the workers' status (*tinggi-menengah-rendah*—high, middle, lower) was still maintained [Panitia Penjusun Buku 1970]. In an article of union's bulletin, it is stated that members of SBKA mostly were lower-level workers as "they are the ones who truly face the economic stringent and therefore, want none other than relief and development" [see S.D. 1946: 3].

13) In a poetic way, this situation was described as such: "Doea boeah organisasi boeroeh K.A. jg moela2 soedah berhampir-hampiran, beroeloer-oeloeran tangan, hendak bersatoe, sekonjong2 melepaskan djabatan tangannja, masing2 memalingkan moekanja, berpisah saling menjampaiakan selamat berdjoeang; mengindjak djalan perdjoeangannja masing2 jg memboedjoer, dan bertoedjoean sama" [Pemimpin Madjalah Kereta Api 1946: 21].

14) SSKA later fused with other trams union in 1949 as Persatuan Buruh Kereta Api (PBKA) under the leadership of Koesna Poeradiredja. Up to late 1950 there were several attempts to fuse between SBKA and PBKA (*Merdeka*, 26 December 1950), yet some "ideological differences" as it was reported, hindered the fusion.

Historical Gap

Although one newspaper's report celebrated the establishment of SBKA as the revival of VSTP [see *Boeroeh*, 12 March 1946], there is no indication this was true, as there existed no direct linkage between the two organizations. Even during the colonial period railway (native Indonesian) workers usually took up their father's work and, like in other countries, "strong family links developed and railway dynasties spanning the generations became a regular feature of the pattern of employment" [Richards and MacKenzie 1988: 225]. It should be noted that during the first year of Japanese occupation the railway bureau (陸輸総局, 鉄道局) recruited a great number of young native Indonesians who just graduated from technical schools [Panitia Penjusun Buku 1970: 17].

As a prime example, Moenadi, the first Chairperson of SBKA, started working for the railway bureau through that recruitment process. He was 26 years old as he passed the entrance examination to become a train-driver and in April 1943, he began his service there as *leerling hoofdmachinist* (apprentice for head of train driver). He recalled that there were a lot of young men around his age, some even much younger, joining the work for the railway bureau.

The composition of the railway workers labour force had changed then. They were young men coming from diverse social backgrounds and, upon recruitment, received the same intensive Japanese technical training. Moenadi [n.d.: 8] notes that the strict training which lasted for 8 months had made all the participants bonded into solidarity as being the same colonial subjects under the Japanese. But still they possessed little knowledge of unionism and, under the current system, did not see any need to build a labour union. These young men were the ones dominating the composition of the SBKA's central board.¹⁵⁾

It was indeed the notion of solidarity among railway workers that provided the basis to foster their nationalist spirit. Nationalism was the ideological force behind the dynamics of their activities and became the most important symbol that unified the railway workers at that time. As we have seen, nationalism supplied the courage for railway workers in carrying out their "duty to the nation" when they took over the railway stations.

But once this target was accomplished and this nationalist spirit had become a factual phenomenon on its own, the tone changed. Stations were all already under their control and the next project was to operate the railway system. The nationalist drive was still present as with this moral fiber these young workers later became the backbone of railway operation during the early years of revolutionary period. Given the circumstances as determined by the government policies, it had adopted a new course. As the railway workers viewed their work as something vital for the independence struggle but at the same time also had to face the structural conditions imposed on

15) Among the members, Hardjosoebroto, who was the oldest (born on April 22, 1894), Asmodihardjo (born on July 3, 1896) and Hadisoemartono (born on October 10, 1908), had worked at the railway bureau of the Dutch colonial times, and only the latter two were members of Perhimpunan Pegawai Spoor dan Tram (Union of Railway and Tramway Workers, PPST). See *Orang Indonesia jang terkemoeka di Djawa* [2604[1944]]: 9 for Hardjosoebroto, 447-448 for Asmodihardjo, 450 for Hadisoemartono.

them by the government's *Makloemats*, they maintained their nationalist spirit and channeled it into new institution. The labour union was the best way they could figure out by which they could support the independence struggle and at the same time also uphold their collective identity as workers group in dealing with the government's policies. Thus, the transformation from the workers committee into a labour union cannot be identified as the emergence of "class consciousness" among the workers.¹⁶⁾

This is a very different pattern of union formation from elsewhere. It had no historical precedent even from the colonial period when workers were instigated and encouraged by outside intellectuals to form unions with a strong identity of class conflict [Ingleson 1981]. The colonial labour unions received a lot of ideas from people outside the labour movement, and even from foreigners, on how to circulate ideas, to mobilize and organize themselves [see Sandra 1961; Shiraishi 1990; Trimurti 1980]. Although "collective memory," as Ingleson [2001] indicates, might have helped shaping their experiences in "the direction of post-independence labour unions and the relationship between labour unions, political parties and the state," it had little direct impact during the actual process of union formation during 1945-50 period.¹⁷⁾

The SBKA's initial orientation was, as described above, based on its condition and its inner workings within the particular situation while, in contrast, VSTP as a progressive union which claimed to "struggle against the imperialist-capitalist" (*perdjoangan melawan imperialisme-kapitalismenja*) and was idealized only for its "revolutionary spirit" (*semangat jang revoloesioner*) but with no description on their institution and actual organizing experiences [see *Boeroeh*, 12 March 1946]. The SBKA itself did not identify with or make any mention of the VSTP. So apparently, "collective memory" could only be passed over to new generations where the supporting institutions still existed and the general socio-environment allowed it to survive through the years.

Conclusion

This essay describes the circumstances surrounding, and the material impetus of union formation during the revolutionary period by focusing on SBKA. It has shown how SBKA was formed due to the nationalist drive and also constructed in response to the government's plans to overcome the spreading of syndicalism among the workers. Nationalism as an ideology had built the workers' spirit of solidarity, while as the state was taking in shape after independence, and through various *Makloemats*, the government provided the context for union formation. In this situation, SBKA was

16) Thompson [1963: 9] clearly indicates that "class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs." Although railway workers articulated a lot of these shared experiences, their orientation was still directed towards the independence of the Republic. Obviously, this nationalist spirit encompassed the development of class consciousness as an identity among those workers.

17) Boomgaard [1999] made an interesting proposition on the situation of labour movement during the 1930s to show that the tide of union activism of that period might operate differently below the calmness of general situation.

an end result symbolizing railway workers' nationalist spirit and maintaining their collective group identity. With little continuity from VSTP's activism, SBKA was a new creation situated within the frame of the revolutionary period.

It is evident that union formation of the revolutionary period was a purely Indonesian development situated within a singular temporal context. The setting was determined by the revolution when nationalism was the rule and the newly established state was trying to organize society. The moving force was primarily young men with knowledge and experience of Japanese occupation, who built their new organization in discontinuity from the Dutch colonial period. Knowledge about the labour activism during the 1920s might be passed along the communists' system-cell working underground during the 1930s-40s, but it could hardly supply the vibrancy to these new labour unions, besides merely providing a recollection of the great old days.

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